



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

New Middle Eastern Studies

Publication details, including guidelines for submissions:

<http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/>

Review of Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*

Author(s): Nussaibah Younis

To cite this article: Younis, Nussaibah, review of Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2011), *New Middle Eastern Studies*, 1 (2011), <<http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/451>>.

To link to this article: <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/451>

Online Publication Date: 15 June 2011

Disclaimer and Copyright

The NMES editors and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies make every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information contained in the e-journal. However, the editors and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness or suitability for any purpose of the content and disclaim all such representations and warranties whether express or implied to the maximum extent permitted by law. Any views expressed in this publication are the views of the authors and not the views of the Editors or the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies.

Copyright New Middle Eastern Studies, 2011. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, transmitted or disseminated, in any form, or by any means, without prior written permission from New Middle Eastern Studies, to whom all requests to reproduce copyright material should be directed, in writing.

Terms and conditions:

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity

Fanar Haddad

London, C. Hurst & Co., 2011, ix + 296 pp., £25, Paperback

ISBN 978-1849041287

REVIEWED BY NUSSAIBAH YOUNIS

PhD Candidate, School of Government and International Affairs, University of Durham; e-mail: nussaibah@gmail.com

Sectarianism in Iraq is a carefully reasoned and fluently written analysis of the roots and manifestations of sectarian sentiment in Iraq. Despite the challenges inherent to the study of sectarian identity, Haddad maintains a sensitive and nuanced approach to his subject matter throughout the study – a rare and notable achievement. In its unique examination of low cultural production in the post-2003 era, and in its application of theoretical advances to the case of Iraq, Haddad's book forms a valuable contribution to the academic literature on contemporary Iraq.

The sub-title of the book, *Antagonistic visions of unity*, summarises its central argument very succinctly. Haddad argues that there is no face-off in Iraq between a nationalist ideology (good) and a sectarian ideology (bad), but rather that Iraq's communal groups articulate their visions of Iraqi nationalism with reference to their own myth-symbol complexes. In circumstances of heightened inter-communal tension, the version of Iraqi nationalism propagated by one communal group can be perceived as alien or even threatening by another. Haddad gives one example of a Sadrist anthem that describes Iraq as the land of Najaf, Hussein, Sadr, and Karbala (p. 159). While the anthem could be seen as a patriotic celebration of Iraq, the symbols used are rooted in a Shi'ite myth-symbol complex that Sunnis would find difficult to identify with. Such exclusivist visions of the Iraqi nation risk other communal groups feeling sidelined, isolated or even encircled, and motivate them to expound their own communally-inscribed versions of Iraqi nationalism.

The core chapters in Haddad's book examine the following subjects: 1) theoretical approaches to sectarianism; 2) discourses on Iraqi sectarianism; 3) the impact of sanctions on Iraq's social fabric; 4) the impact of the 1991 uprisings on sectarian mythologies; 5) articulations of identity in post-2003 Iraq; 6) the rise of aggressive sectarianism and descent into civil war in 2006.

Haddad makes his most valuable and original contributions to the field in his later chapters, which use 'low culture' in the form of poems, anthems, blogs, and youtube clips to analyse sectarian-nationalist discourse in post-2003 Iraq. The difficulty of fieldwork in Iraq means that there is very little academic literature on post-2003 Iraqi society: Haddad's study is perhaps the first to systematically analyse populist discourses circulating in Iraq before and during the Iraqi civil war. Haddad's deconstruction of the symbols and allusions embedded in these sources – enabled by his strong command of Iraqi Arabic and his detailed knowledge of Iraqi history and religious folklore – is extremely instructive and offers a fascinating insight into sectarian contestations over Iraqi nationalism.

Although Haddad's analysis is certainly balanced, the book does suffer from an over-reliance on Shi'ite sources. The chapters on the 1991 uprisings and on the sanctions era focus heavily on Shi'ite perceptions of isolation and victimisation, but give little space to the development (or under-development) of Sunni identity during this period. Even in the post-

2003 chapters, which focus on Sunni perceptions of exclusion from a Shi'ite-dominated state, Shi'ite anthems and poems are used at length as source material when a greater focus on Sunni discourses would have contributed additional depth to the study.

Using the source material, Haddad produces a successful and detailed examination of competing myth-symbol complexes. This is only one of four potential drivers of sectarianism, however, that Haddad identifies in his theoretical chapter. As instructive as it is, Haddad's focus on the myth-symbol complex leads to inadequate scrutiny of economic, state and foreign influences on sectarianism. Charting the impact of economic inequality, state ownership and foreign intervention on sectarianism – particularly in post-2003 Iraq – would have given this study greater explanatory power and would have enabled Haddad to discuss the relative importance of competing myth-symbol complexes in comparison with alternative drivers of sectarianism. Exploring these dimensions would, however, be extremely difficult without fieldwork in Iraq, and with all the security implications that such work would imply it is understandable that this work has not yet been done. As security in Iraq improves in the future, this is a gap in the literature on Iraqi sectarianism that researchers in the field should look to fill.

As a whole, *Sectarianism in Iraq* presents a well-crafted argument that is consistently pursued and substantiated throughout the narrative. In his solid early chapters Haddad avoids many of the stereotypes and lazy generalisations common in work about the period, and in his later chapters Haddad's close analysis of competing myth-symbol complexes uses original source material to generate powerful new insights. *Sectarianism in Iraq* is undoubtedly a valuable and very welcome addition to the literature on ethnic conflict, sectarianism, Shi'ite-Sunni relations, and on contemporary Iraq.